

Sermon: February 4, 2024 – Mark 2: 1-12

Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

There are a bunch of interrelated words that I want to place before us this morning: sympathy, empathy, concern, benevolence, service, compassion, and lovingkindness. (These are such important words, I'm going to leave them on-screen throughout the sermon). All of these words imply the ability to notice the plight of another, and to be moved to some form of active response. Some of them are better than others at maintaining the dignity of the person being helped, but all of them, to some degree, relate to love of neighbour, a core part of our calling as followers of Jesus Christ.

This morning, our gospel lesson is one we don't hear all that often in Sunday worship, but I remember this dramatic story from my childhood Bible story books, dismantling someone's roof in order to lower a sick person through it to be healed by Jesus. It was showy, it took a lot of effort, it made a bit of a spectacle of the poor guy being lowered, but the lengths they went to indicates both a level of despair at his condition and a high level of trust that Jesus could do something about it.

As this week has unfolded, I've been drawn to this story in a new way. Not from the standpoint of a bystander or spectator, but wondering with a degree of empathy how this would have been for the people directly involved: the person brought for healing, Jesus the healer, and the friends who went to such extraordinary measures to bring them together. This up-close-and-personal approach strikes me as particularly important in our social and political context where decisions are made with scant consideration of the people actually involved. The concept of "walking a mile in someone's shoes" – or in the case of today's gospel reading, enduring an hour in someone's pain – is an important one that we are called back to, time and time again.

This event is set near the beginning of Jesus' ministry, in Capernaum, on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. Present-day Capernaum is a fascinating place, with a modern structure, St. Peter's Church, preserving and protecting the house of the apostle Peter, and then adjacent to that some well preserved ruins of the local synagogue, and a type of row housing that common folk lived in. Retired United Church Minister David Ewart writes, "Being 'at home' in Capernaum is a significant social locator [for this healing story]. I was born into a small village, and being 'at home' in a village is about a lot more than merely having a house to live in there. It is all about everyone knowing everyone else (preferably from birth) - and everyone knowing everyone's place in the village social life".

So that's my entry point into the life of the man who was lowered through the roof. He would have been *known* by these people, and, unfortunately, judged and pitied by them, his paralysis interpreted as proof that he or one of his ancestors had done something bad/sinful. Imagine going through life with that double-whammy: you had all the challenges of trying to survive this paralysis, and then your neighbours add onto it judgment that all your problems were what you deserved. At some point, living in a place of constant belittlement almost guarantees you would start believing it yourself, internalizing a sense of shame, accepting your neighbours' hurtful assessment of the situation. While I don't want to drift into ableism, I also don't want to downplay how incredibly challenging it would have been to live with paralysis, how challenging the day to day existence would have been. How hard would it be to keep a candle of hope burning in your heart when everyone in the system believed that your difficulties were entirely your own fault?

And with this, I bring to mind everyone in hard circumstances in our time and place. No, we don't formally say that someone living with big challenges is sinful, but a degree of blame is often implied, especially if someone is without work, food or shelter... and that tempers our willingness to help. No, we as Church or even as society do not have the resources to fix things for everyone in need, but the thing is, it's not about fixing. Helping is not the same as rescuing, boundaries are important. But respecting and lifting up someone's dignity starts with listening rather than assuming we know why things are the way they are. Being Christ to someone starts with a compassionate empathy, founded in understanding, which opens us to someone's story and lets it touch our hearts. Not as the one holding the power and doling out the solutions, but as a fellow traveler in life who can relate to the heartbreak of brokenness and the hope of restoration.

As many of you know, two of our three adult children are trained social workers, and I recall a phone call received unexpectedly several years ago. The voice on the other end of the line said something like, "Dad, I just called to thank you and Mom for the household that we grew up in." What spurred this, was their experience working in a rough downtown shelter in Victoria, and getting to know the back-story of the clients... and finding that, in their estimation, at least 80% of them suffered some form of childhood abuse, neglect or brokenness, and with no life experience of living with love, safety and predictability. And yet from the outside, what would their lives look like? Bad choices, bad lifestyles, their own fault. Or to come back to our Bible story and the paralyzed man, circumstances that, so far as we know, were inflicted, not chosen, but forced him to deal not only with the inherent challenges of his life, but also the smugness of his neighbours.

And yet there was a ray of sunshine here. Four people – friends, neighbours, family members, or well-intentioned community members, we're not told their connection – took it upon themselves to bring this man on a mat to Jesus. I'm going to take a leap here and suggest some sort of assent by the man – there's no implication that this was done against his will – and these four advocates were not willing to accept that the way things were was the way they needed to be. There could be something new, something more for this man. That may or may not have involved physical healing, it could be more about restoration to respectful community. And in a part of the story I find quite thrilling, Jesus was starting to get such a following that there was no way for the four carriers and the man on the mat them to push their way through the crowd... but they did, curiously, have access to the roof. Up on that roof – likely made up of thatch and boughs, as there's not a lot of hardwood trees in Galilee – they tore a hole big enough to lower their companion into the room where Jesus was. The physicality of all this is striking, as is the determination to make it happen AND the trust that Jesus could do something for this person.

Sometimes, that is our role as Church – to be those four helpers, the ones that put our shoulder to something that just needs to happen. Or looking at it in a slightly different way, the ones who get close enough to those in need to learn what kind of help would actually be help. This past week, I, along with many of you, listened in stunned surprise as our Premier, who is similarly charged with listening, caring, and taking actions that make life easier for people, named one thing after another to make life harder for trans kids and those who support them. As a parent of a trans-masculine young adult I wonder what it would be like if our child was a teenager and we were going through those transitions now, and the thought stops me cold. It all makes me wonder if anyone in the decision-making process took even one moment to imagine what it is like to live in that young person's skin. I hear lots of paternalism, lots of judgmentalism, abundant fear of sexuality and sex ed, but a shortage of

empathy and compassion and lovingkindness. Our Chinook Winds Region issued a statement on Friday morning, posted on our Facebook page and website, that calls us as Church to remember our commitment as an Affirming Ministry within an Affirming Region, and to reach out with loving action and advocacy with and for children and families and medical professionals and educators who are now stranded in place, with pathways to trans health and wholeness for adolescents now officially removed.

In the midst of all this – where we are, where the paralyzed man was – where is Jesus? Well, Jesus is there, healing. He’s there, squabbling with the Pharisees whose superiority and fears have led to some bogus technical objection. And again, I quote from David Ewart who writes, “The next thing that Jesus says is actually the turning point and key to this whole story. What does Jesus say? He says: ‘Son’. When Jesus calls the man, ‘Son,’ he breaks the social barriers that normally isolate disabled persons. This is actually the real miracle in this story. While the man is still paralyzed; while his sins are still unforgiven; Jesus draws the man back into a full, honoured, place in the village social circle. Wow.... [and] What does Jesus say next? He says: ‘Your sins are forgiven’”. Not only was this man reconciled to his community, Jesus let him know that whatever barrier there may have been between him and God, whatever relational brokenness there had been, were now restored to their intended wholeness.

It’s always a bit dodgy for us to look at the characters in a Bible story and imagine ourselves as Jesus, but in this case I think we are called to do exactly that... for as Church, as those baptized into the dying and rising of Jesus Christ, we are both empowered and charged to bring Christ’s love to life, to be the hands and feet and the heart of Christ when something other than love seems to have the upper hand. That comes through our benevolent activities, that comes through the prayer life of our Healing Pathway, that comes through our expressions of public witness on behalf of anyone who is targeted or singled out because of their deepest identity. We do this as a response to Christ’s calling on our lives, and because of a belief in the transformative power of God, who can, does, and will overturn intolerance. Jesus, always, is present in the struggles and sufferings of those targeted by the meanness of others, or the unfairness of policy.

Showy, unusual, and oh so memorable – the story of the man lowered through a roof in Capernaum opens us to necessary and uncomfortable truths. May its challenge to us, be one that draws us to sympathy, empathy, concern, benevolence, service, compassion, and lovingkindness... in the name and power of Christ. Amen.

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